

Preparatory Committee for the 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

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Nuclear weapons and security: a humanitarian perspective

Working paper submitted by Austria

1. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons aspires “to facilitate the cessation of the manufacture of nuclear weapons, the liquidation of all their existing stockpiles, and the elimination from national arsenals of nuclear weapons and the means of their delivery” (eleventh preambular paragraph of the Treaty). All States parties to the Treaty thus share the objective of a world without nuclear weapons. The first part of that paragraph (“Desiring to further the easing of international tensions and the strengthening of trust between States”) allows for the assumption that the States parties believe that the achievement of that goal will bring more security for everybody.
2. Notwithstanding the almost 50 years that have passed since its entry into force, all five States parties to the Treaty that are defined by it as nuclear-weapon States continue to possess such weapons. Judging by their publicly declared positions, they are reluctant to give up those weapons, in particular because they believe them to be, under the current circumstances, indispensable for their national security.
3. In contrast, the majority of the world’s States have joined the Treaty as non-nuclear-weapon States, thereby expressing their judgment that they do not need nuclear weapons for their security. Most of them belong to nuclear-weapon-free zones in their regions because, apparently, they deem their security to be better served without nuclear weapons in their region.
4. Some States pursued or even possessed nuclear weapons in the past but renounced them later and acceded to the Treaty as non-nuclear-weapon States. Those States initially believed, as the nuclear-weapon States still do, that the possession of nuclear weapons promoted their national security but later came to the conclusion that this was not the case. Such examples show how the views of particular States on the role of nuclear weapons for their national security can evolve over time.
5. The most important recent development to have an impact on the views of States on the role of nuclear weapons in national, as well as international, security has been the so-called humanitarian initiative. Building on the recognition in the final document of the 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons, the initiative manifested itself, in particular, in three



international conferences dedicated to the problem and held in Norway, Mexico and Austria in 2013 and 2014, in the Humanitarian Pledge issued on the occasion of the third of those gatherings and subsequently endorsed by 127 States and in the "humanitarian statement" delivered by the then Minister for Foreign Affairs of Austria, Sebastian Kurz, on behalf of 159 States on the occasion of the 2015 Review Conference.

6. The humanitarian initiative led to the conclusion, in view of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons, that those weapons must never be used again under any circumstances and that only their total elimination can guarantee that outcome. The conclusion motivated the negotiation and adoption in 2017 of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which complements and strengthens the Non-Proliferation Treaty, in particular by contributing to the implementation of article VI.

7. The humanitarian initiative has re-emphasized the important fact that nuclear weapons affect the security not only of the few States possessing them but also of all States of the world. That is equally true of nuclear weapons spreading to additional States and of those already in existence. As stated in the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the devastation caused by a nuclear war would be visited upon all humankind and not only upon the States immediately involved militarily. The final document of the 2010 Review Conference acknowledges that by referring explicitly to the principle of undiminished security for all. In view of the humanitarian consequences and risks associated with any use of nuclear weapons, undiminished security for all will be attained only through the elimination of nuclear weapons.

8. Until recently, nuclear weapons were considered primarily from the point of view of a narrow interpretation of security centred on the State. In reality, the security of a State is tantamount to the security of its population. Therefore, a juxtaposition of national security versus human security seems artificial and superfluous. By focusing on individual human beings as those immediately affected in the case of nuclear weapons being used, the humanitarian initiative has contributed to the necessary broadening of the perception of security. A valid assessment of the security implications of nuclear weapons has to be based on a comprehensive understanding of the term.

9. In terms of security, it is important to point out that the very possession of nuclear weapons by a State exposes its population to a heightened risk of becoming the target of the nuclear weapons of another State. By resorting to a nuclear strike against an adversary capable of nuclear retaliation, a State would heighten that risk for its own population dramatically.

10. Those relying on the concept of nuclear deterrence highlight its alleged rationality. In order to assess that judgment, it is important to understand that a nuclear strike is a fundamentally irrational act. That is obvious for a first strike. A retaliatory strike, however, would seem to serve no rational purpose either. It would not undo the destruction already suffered in the first strike. On the contrary, assuming a second-strike capability on the part of the enemy, retaliation might even provoke additional nuclear strikes.

11. Another important reason making any nuclear strike fundamentally irrational is the fact that its effects cannot be contained in space and time. As the humanitarian initiative has shown, a nuclear strike would not only destroy its target but also have significant, long-term effects on a much larger area and, possibly, the whole planet. The spread of radioactive particles (nuclear fallout), contaminating wide areas of territory for years and, possibly, decades to come (nuclear winter), is the most well-known, but by no means the only, example. As a rule, the effects would spread across national borders and not only harm the targeted country but also have a severe impact on other countries. In today's interdependent world, it is unlikely that any State would

be able to escape completely the effects of a nuclear explosion, no matter where on the planet it occurred. It is likely that even the country launching a nuclear attack would itself be affected to some degree by the consequences of the resulting detonation.

12. Testimony from international humanitarian organizations shows that no adequate capacity exists, either at the State or at the international level, to respond to the scope and scale of the consequences of a nuclear explosion. Should such an event occur, that lack of response capacity would lead not only to horrific scenes of large numbers of victims simply left to their fate, but also a breakdown of public order in the affected region, with security implications beyond the physical effects of the detonation.

13. To resort to a nuclear strike would thus not be rational under any circumstances. Its humanitarian consequences and those of retaliation would inevitably fall back on the initiator. This undermines the credibility of the concept of nuclear deterrence, since an adversary would assume that nuclear weapons would not be used.

14. Reason has, luckily, prevailed so far and certainly reduces the risk of the deliberate use of nuclear weapons but there are, unfortunately, other factors currently at work that significantly drive up the risk of a nuclear explosion occurring. The example of the current crisis over the nuclear programme of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is a stark reminder that nuclear war could literally break out any day. As recent scientific findings show, the use of nuclear weapons through miscalculation or by accident can never be excluded and is even becoming more likely as the number of actors possessing nuclear weapons increases. In addition, some non-State actors are eager to have access to nuclear weapons. Arguably, those actors would be much less restrained than States when it comes to using such weapons. In the age of cyberattacks, in particular, it is a worrying prospect that States possessing nuclear weapons might lose control over them.

15. To sum up, new scientific findings about the humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons suggest that nuclear weapons threaten security even more, and in more respects, than was previously known. Therefore, Austria suggests that the following recommendations regarding the subject matter of the present working paper for the 2020 Review Conference be made:

(a) To reaffirm the Treaty's objective of a world without nuclear weapons and to emphasize the security benefit that it will bring to all States and their populations, without exception;

(b) To recognize the importance of human security in assessing the security implications of nuclear weapons;

(c) To highlight the security implications, inter alia, of the long-term and wide-area effects of a nuclear detonation;

(d) To acknowledge the risk of a nuclear weapon detonation actually occurring;

(e) To bear in mind the lack of adequate capacity for disaster relief in the case of such a detonation;

(f) To encourage States to engage in discussions about the security implications of nuclear weapons;

(g) To urge the nuclear-weapon States to adjust their policies with regard to nuclear weapons, as necessary, in a way that promotes nuclear disarmament as mandated under article VI of the Treaty and thereby contributes to achieving the Treaty's overarching objective of a world without nuclear weapons.